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Brief Looks

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BRIEF LOOKS

By

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Each new glimpse is determined by many,
Many glimpses before.
It's this glimpse which inspires you - like an occurrence
And I notice those are always my moments of having an idea
That maybe I could start a painting.

Everything is already in art - like a big bowl of soup
Everything is in there already:
And you just stick your hand in, and find something for you. .
But it was already there - like a stew.

There's no way of looking at a work of art by itself
It's not self-evident
It needs a history; it needs a lot of talking about:
It's part of a whole man's life.

Y'know the real world, this so-called real world,
Is just something you put up with, like everybody else.
I'm in my element when I am a little bit out of this world.
then I'm in the real world - I'm on the beam.
Because when I'm falling, I'm doing all right:
when I'm slipping, I say, hey, this is interesting
It's when I'm standing upright that bothers me:
I'm not doing so good; I'm stiff.
As a matter of fact, I'm really slipping most of the time,
into that glimpse. I'm like a slipping glimser.

I get excited just to see
That sky is blue; that earth is earth.
And that's the hardest thing: to see a rock somewhere,
And there it is: earth-colored rock.
I'm getting closer to that.

Then there is a time in life when you just take a walk:
And you walk in your own landscape.

Willem de Kooning

Art is an emotional feeling, an intuitive sensation of some thing or some state that is not of this world. The creation of art is a conscious, intellectual attempt to render this spiritual feeling in such a way as to make it objective and logical. Many artists, philosophers, and historians have shared their experience of this other world so that we may come closer to knowing it. Their work and teachings have helped to guide me as I attempt to apprehend what is the spiritual in art.

For the eye has this strange property: it rests only in beauty; like a butterfly it seeks colour and basks in warmth. On a winter's night like this, when nature has been at pains to polish and preen herself, it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone. The thing it cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose those trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships.¹

Life starts and stops. It is broken up into moments, days, decades. Lives are scattered, divided, at odds. The world is uneasy, jerky, and apparently directionless. But life is also beautifully continuous. It is bigger than individuals or decades. It is the miracle that guides the migration of many creatures. It is the spiritual strength that protects man along his darkest journeys. It is the "perpetual rebirth of wonder."² Life, in essence, is a mystery yet to be explained or defined. It is to this metaphysical question that art addresses itself.

We humans are intellectual creatures. We need to give form to ideas, to explain the world

in which we live. The history of mankind is one of exploring and seeking answers to each new question that we encounter. We have empirically answered many of these questions, and have created answers for many more, and still the question of the 'spirit', the essence of life, remains unanswerable. But the spiritual has no form, it is not an idea which can be defined.³ We must come to know it intuitively.

The unexplainable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big far beyond my understanding - to understand maybe by trying to put it into form. To find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill.⁴

Man cannot define the spiritual, yet he does experience this higher reality intuitively, unconsciously. It is through creativity, through art, that man can give objective form to that which is empirically undefinable.

Beauty is unattainable, yet it is what gives art it's significance. It is the unknown.⁵

The objective form of art cannot define the unknown. Instead it offers a metaphor or analogy to the 'higher order' which can only be experienced intuitively.⁶

What every true work of art provides is a pattern of order - a unity of general form from a variety of elements; a means to the conception of a macrocosmic unity through an assimilable microcosm. The satisfaction that this combination gives is essentially a blending together of our responses into a unified whole, providing us with a model for the organization of our emotional life and for the problems of daily existence. This is what we loosely term 'beauty' in a work of art.⁷

Life is a dynamic continual flow. As time passes, it assumes many new and varied forms, but its underlying 'essence' remains constant. It is this unchanging 'essence' which binds all life together, past, present, future.

Art too is an ongoing process. Contemporary images are inexorably tied to all previous styles, movements, and forms of expression. These in turn become part of the history which gives rise to new forms of artistic expression. Just as the essence of life is unceasing and beautiful, so too is the sensation of order which is present in all art. The forms which art assumes must be contemporary, relative to their place in history, if they are to successfully provide a model for daily life. But the expression of order, the 'spirit' of art, is timeless.⁸

Art lies behind the cloth of surface things, it is always deeper than appearance and must be delved for. Within or about every living work of art or thing of beauty, or fragment of life, there is some strange inner kernel which cannot be reached with explanations, clarifications, examinations, or definitions. This kernel remains beneath, behind, beyond. It is this dimensionless particle which makes art mystical, unknown, real, and experienceable.⁹

The expression of art is then a timeless metaphor for a higher order known to us through unconscious intuition. The art object is a vehicle by which the artist attempts to communicate his own vision of the spiritual world. The art object is of the physical world, it has form, but, by its 'presence', it is able to convey the essence of the spiritual reality, the 'inner life'.¹⁰

Webster defines unconscious as part of the psychic apparatus lying outside the sphere of physical science or knowledge. It is immaterial, moral, or spiritual in origin and thus does not ordinarily enter the individual's awareness. Yet it is within this realm of psychic life that each of us is able to apprehend the essential nature of reality. It is the psychic life, the 'inner life', and its ongoing

experience of reality that ties every life to the greater order.

The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all wrinkles and roughness a central oyster, an enormous eye.¹¹

It is only through our psychic 'inner life' that we can experience the essential nature of the reality and spirituality of art. The unconscious is 'the enormous eye'. The psychic inner life is not a separate entity but is instead common to all life. It is the spirit of man. Similar to the perpetual flow of life, our 'inner life' knows no bonds of time and space; it too is timeless, moving freely back and forth through present and past.

Each moment of our psychic existence is simultaneously and uninterruptedly the end of the past and the beginning of the future. The present is the continuous, indefinable, unseverable link between past and present.¹²

Philosophy offers many varied explanations of man's spiritual existence. Henri Bergson states:

Reality, which is a process of becoming, is a dynamic continuity that cannot be sliced into proportionate bits and can be apprehended only through intuition.¹³

Bergson stresses the vital importance of memory to perception. All that we perceive intuitively is linked with all previous experiences, and the affects of those experiences come to us through memory. These memories are of events and sensations from the past, but our intuitive experience of them is in the realm of psychologically continuous time, our 'inner duration'.

However brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration, and involves consequently an effort of memory which prolongs one into another a plurality of moments.¹⁴

It is through the durational flow of the 'inner life' that we are able to perceive the true reality.

It is not a reality of the chronological now, but is composed of all previous experiences and sensations which cumulatively affect our intuitive perception of the continuing present.

Virginia Woolf presents a beautiful literary experience of the 'inner life' as a very real, flowing, psychic process.

But with Mr. Ramsey bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached—he was walking up and down the terrace—ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint. She stooped, she turned; she took up this rag; she squeezed that tube. But all she did was to ward him off a moment. He made it impossible for her to do anything. For if she gave him the least chance, if he saw her disengaged a moment, looking his way a moment, he would be on her, saying, as he had said last night, "You find us much changed." Last night he had got up and stopped before her, and said that. Dumb and staring though they all sat, the six children whom they used to call after the Kings and Queens of England — the Red, the Fair, the Wicked, the Ruthless — she felt how they raged under it. Kind old Mrs. Beckwith said something sensible. But it was a house full of unrelated passions — she had felt that all evening. And on top of this chaos Mr. Ramsey got up, pressed her hands and said: "You will find us much changed" and none of them had moved or spoken: but had sat there as if they were forced to let him say it. Only James (certainly the Sullen) scowled at the lamp: and Cam screwed her handkerchief round her finger. Then he reminded them that they were going to the Lighthouse tomorrow. They must be ready, in the hall, on the stroke of half-past seven. Then, with his hand on the door, he stopped; he turned upon them. Did they not want to go? he demanded. Had they dared say No (he had some reason for wanting it) he would have flung himself tragically backwards into the bitter waters of despair. Such a gift he had for gesture. He looked like a king in exile. Doggedly James said yes. Cam stumbled more wretchedly. Yes, oh yes, they'd both be ready, they said. And it struck her, this was tragedy — not palls, dust, and the shroud; but children coerced, their spirits subdued. James was sixteen, Cam, seventeen, perhaps. She had looked round for some one who was not there,

for Mrs. Ramsey presumable. But there was only kind Mrs. Beckwith turning over her sketches under the lamp. Then, being tired, her mind still rising and falling with the sea, the taste and smell that places have after long absence possessing her, the candles wavering in her eyes, she had lost herself and gone under. It was a wonderful night, the moon surprised them, enormous, pale, as they passed the staircase window. She had slept as once. She set her clean canvas firmly upon the easel, as a barrier, frail, but she hoped sufficiently substantial to ward off Mr. Ramsey and his exactingness.¹⁵

We all experience these moments of 'time in the mind', as described by Virginia Woolf. In fact, they are so commonplace that we rarely give them much intellectual consideration, yet there is no question that each of us spend much of our life in duration. It's there that we really exist. Each moment and each sensation are part of our entire being. We are not made up of parts, but rather we just seem to know intuitively that we are whole.

Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world... the inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm.¹⁶

Emotion is an intuitive, durational experience. An emotional response is not simply an isolated incident in time, but is instead a cumulative result of all past experience. Therefore emotions and feelings are in a constant flux of evolution and change. Bergson writes:

Our emotions grow in a duration whose moments permeate one another. By separating these moments from each other, by spreading out time in space, we cause our emotions to lose their true life and color.¹⁷

Color is a vehicle of powerful emotional expression and yet science can give no explanation as to how this phenomenon occurs. It is widely assumed to be a function of association, but not an association

which is simply the product of conscious learning. The effect of color is much too direct and spontaneous to be just a cognitive experience.¹⁸ The expressive quality of color and color relationships is a psychological process of interdependent 'inner durational' associations.

The creative possibilities of color are not limited to plastic expression. Although the composition and function of color are two of the most important factors in determining the qualitative content of a painting, the reciprocal relation of color to color produces a phenomenon of a more mysterious order. This new phenomenon is psychological. Color stimulates certain moods in us. It awakens joy or fear in accordance with its configuration. In fact, the whole world as we experience it visually comes to us through the mystic realm of color.¹⁹

Each sensation of color is connected durationally with all past experience through memory. Each new perception becomes part of the spiritual 'inner life' which in turn must affect the perception of all future experience. The ability of color to stimulate an emotional response is a process that occurs intuitively. The resulting emotional sensation is consciously, often physically, perceived, yet it occurs through no conscious effort. It is in this way that color is mysterious and spiritual.

I'm not interested in relationships of color and form... I'm not an abstractionist. Color expresses basic human emotions, - tragedy, ecstasy, doom. The people who weep before a picture are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.²⁰

Color is able to create emotional expression because in time, through repetition, unconscious color experience takes on very specific, conscious meaning and therefore becomes symbolic.²¹ It is these symbolic possibilities which render it such an expressive force in art.

The meaning of a word - to me - is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words.²²

The process of artistic creation is by definition an intuitive one. In order to objectively re-present an intuitively perceived reality, the artist must 'encounter' the objective world.²³

Encounter implies an intensity of awareness or a heightened consciousness, and occurs as a process of:

intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.²⁴

It is in the duration of heightened consciousness that one 'sees' the spiritual, one glimpses the nature of the unconscious world.

Virginia Woolf's vision is clear:

But, I thought, there is always some sediment of irritation when the moment is as beautiful as it is now. The psychologists must explain: one looks up, one is overcome by beauty extravagantly greater than one could expect - there are now pink clouds over Battle; the fields are mottled, marbled-one's perception blows out rapidly like air balls expanded by some rush of air, and then, when all seems blown to its fullest, tautest, with beauty and beauty and beauty, a pin pricks; it collapses. But what is the pin? As far as I could tell the pin had something to do with one's own impotency. I cannot hold this-I cannot express this-I am overcome by it-I am mastered. Somewhere in that region one's discontent lay; and it was allied with the idea that one's nature demands mastery over all that it receives; and mastery here meant the power to convey what one saw over Sussex so that another person could share it. And Further, there was another prick of the pin: one was wasting one's chance; for beauty spread at one's right hand, at one's left; at one's back too; it was escaping all the time; one could only offer a thimble to a torrent that could fill baths, lakes.²⁵

Creation is intuitive because it is the result of a heightened sensory encounter with the objective world. It is during such an encounter that an artist may be able to intuitively glimpse the essential nature of what he sees, as well as to see mechanically its physical properties. The new object he creates must be analogous to the sensed reality rather than be a repetitious copy of physical reality if the new form is to function as art. The created object is an image of the artist's unique vision.

Vision must combine 'the act of seeing with the bodily eye' with 'the act or fact of seeing something not actually present to the eye' in such a way as to create an 'image' which is not merely 'an artificial imitation... of the external form of any object' but adds to the quality of the 'image' in the sense of a 'mental representation', not by direct perception, but by memory, or imagination.²⁶

Through imagination, or sensed reality, the artist is able to give objective form to his vision. His intuitive perception of reality, his perception of his 'inner life', is a synthesis of all his emotional experience, and it is also the bond which makes art timeless and spiritual.

My prints are images of my intimate experience with landscape. Five of the eight are of specific locations, and attempt to re-create my emotional experience of each place. I was initially drawn to them by the effect of climatic conditions on the existing color relationships. Each of the remaining three prints is a synthesis of a number of visual experiences and perceived natural phenomenon. Each image was in fact a brief glimpse - often a startling one. I was overcome by what I saw. The memory of each is still very clear to me and as I look at each print I feel close to that spot.

FOOTNOTES

¹Virginia Woolf, Collected Essays, Volume IV (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1953), p. 23.

²Lawrence Ferlinghetti, A Coney Island of the Mind (New York: New Directions, 1958).

³Adolph Portmann et al., Color Symbolism, Six Excerpts from the Eranos Yearbook 1972 (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1977), p. 130.

⁴Georgia O'Keeffe, Georgia O'Keeffe (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), p. 184.

⁵Maurice Tuchman, gen. ed., New York School, the First Generation (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1969), 31.

⁶James John Sweeney, Vision and Image, A Way of Seeing (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 22.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 53 - 54.

⁹Tuchman, p. 125.

¹⁰Hans Hoffman, Search for the Real (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), p. 40.

¹¹Woolf, Collected Essays, Volume IV, pp. 21 - 22.

¹²Portmann, p. 147.

¹³Shiv K. Kumar, Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 76.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1929), pp. 221 - 223.

¹⁶Gail Levin, Edward Hopper, The Art and the Artist (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1980), p. 9.

¹⁷Kumar, p. 30.

¹⁸Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, A Psychology of the Creative Mind (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1974), p. 368.

¹⁹Hoffman, p. 45.

²⁰Diane Waldman, Mark Rothko - A Retrospective (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1978), p. 58.

²¹Portmann, p. 42.

²²O'Keeffe, p. 1.

²³Rollo May, The Courage to Create (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 44.

²⁴Kumar, p. 96.

²⁵Virginia Woolf, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942), pp. 7 - 8.

²⁶Sweeney, pp. 32 - 33.

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